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## Musical on courtship, failed marriage soars 'The Last Five Years' at JCCGW

by Lisa Traiger

Arts Correspondent

Musical composer Jason Robert Brown turned a relationship upside down and backward in his snapshot of a courtship and failed marriage. *The Last Five Years*, the chamber-sized musical that takes its viewers through the ups and downs of a pair of young New Yorkers who meet, date, marry, bicker and break up, reconfigures the well-worn failed-relationship theme.

Brown sets his two principals in motion: one, Jamie Wellerstein, moving forward through the story, the other, Cathy Hiatt, moving backward in time, from the inevitable breakup to a butterflies-in-stomach first date.

The young and unexpectedly proficient Maryland troupe, *Limelight Theatre*, working in collaboration with Tysons Corner's fledgling 1st Stage Theatre, stages this seemingly simple, but deceptively complex musical piece at the Kreeger Auditorium at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington in Rockville.

Founded in 2008 by Jan Stewart, a lawyer with a yen to create affordable musical theater that features local talents, *Limelight* isn't affiliated with the JCCGW. Even so, it's still a thrill to see full-fledged Jewish theater back on the Kreeger stage, which once served as home of the critically acclaimed Washington Jewish Theatre ‹ before budget challenges and changed programming goals took their toll.

Brown is a fine composer/lyricist, whose work also includes *Songs for a New World*; *Parade*, based on the trial and lynching of Leo Frank; and *13*, a look at the bar/bat mitzvah year, which will have a brief run at the JCCGW in June with another visiting theater company. His music requires highly skilled singer/actors who need not merely belt a Broadway showstopper, but also easily finesse Brown's pop, jazz, rock and classical inflections.

As Cathy, Carolyn Myers, a fresh-faced redhead, maintains expert control of her lovely soprano, which she can use in girlish trills or lower to a dark smolder. Jamie, played by lanky John Loughney, croons with ease a warm ballad, then breaks into a smidgen of head-banging rock or easy-listening pop.

Director Jay Brock keeps this duet in motion yet never truly in union ‹ Brown's premise ‹ until the centerpiece of the show, when for a brief moment the pair is copasetic. Musical director Jeffry Newberger, on lead violin, maintains well-modulated control of his six-piece string and piano ensemble. Situated on stage behind designer Jos. Musumeci's heavy-handed set of wood loft-like panels and stone abutments ‹ the only off note in this production ‹ the musical ensemble soars through Brown's score. What a joy to hear the warm scoglio of a pair of cellos ‹ played by Devree Lewis and Amy Huzjak ‹ joined by Mike Scoglio on bass, Jaime Ibacache on guitar and Jason Solounias's sensitive piano playing.

In tracking the forward and backward trajectories of the pair, *The Last Five Years* follows

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Jaime, a nice Jewish boy whose mother frequents the Spring Valley JCC, and Cathy, a small-town Midwestern girl who moves to Manhattan with stars in her eyes. Other versions have caricatured Jaime as a neurosis-riddled, high-strung writer.

Loughney's easygoing portrayal is a relief in comparison, although he at times does seem caddish. In his rendering of the patter song Shiksa Goddess, which traces his Jewish roots in an ode to his past, we see his Jewishness as integral to the relationship. It's an aspect that he strives to reject or at least ignore with the rejoinder: "Hey! Shiksa goddess! I've been waiting for someone like Š you."

A budding writer just out of Columbia, Jaime finds himself on the fast track to success, gained through his well-reviewed manuscript, in this version also titled Shiksa Goddess, that unabashedly mines his relationship with Cathy.

Though less completely drawn, Cathy, on the other hand, struggles through the indignity of auditioning for chorus parts in out-of-town summer stock. The match, perhaps doomed from the start, suffers at writer Brown's hand for focusing more sharply on Jaime's growing success and distancing from his partner, than on Cathy's struggles.

Ultimately, it takes two to make ‹ or break ‹ a relationship, and this seems to be an inherent flaw of Brown's script. In the hands of director Jay Brock, The Last Five Years soars where it needs to, and explores the darker side of relationships gamely, if not wholly.

As an ode and elegy to the ups and downs of love and marriage, in Limelight and 1st Stage's production, it also conquers the challenges of presenting musical theater with care and talent.

The Last Five Years is onstage at the Kreeger Auditorium at the JCCGW in Rockville, April 15-17 and 23-24, and 1st Stage, 1524 Spring Hill Rd., McLean, May 7-9, 14-16 and 21-23. Tickets, \$20-\$30, are available by calling 800-838-3006 or visit [www.mdlimelight.com](http://www.mdlimelight.com).

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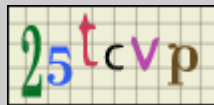
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